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SPECIAL SECTION

Preface

Ethnographic knowledge and the aporias of intersubjectivity

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In *Time and the other: How anthropology makes its object,* Johannes Fabian (1983) calls attention to a paradox at the heart of anthropological practice: namely, the systematic denial of "coevalness," an often misunderstood notion that he defines as the sharing of time that makes ethnographic knowledge possible. In Fabian's terms, there is "a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse" (1983: 31). If this coevalness is the very basis for knowledge, its subsequent erasure or disavowal makes the work of anthropology something of an aporia:

> As soon as it is realized that fieldwork is a form of communicative interaction with an Other, one that must be carried out coevally, on the basis of shared intersubjective Time and intersocietal contemporaneity, a contradiction had to appear between research and writing because anthropological writing had become suffused with strategies and devices of allochronic discourse. (Fabian 1983: 148)

In this sense, coevalness is not to be understood as a fusion of minds or cultures but as a condition for the production of a particular type of knowledge. In other words, it is a temporal relationship that "must be created or at least approached" (ibid: 34) such that "the anthropologist and his interlocutor only 'know' when they meet each other in one and the same contemporality" (164). From this point of view, ethnographic knowledge is made possible through a series of exchanges between anthropologists and their interlocutors in time and space that are shared, in a word, it is knowledge that is intersubjective. Intersubjectivity, which we argue is at the core of ethnographic knowledge, is also the central question that we set out to explore in this issue.

The argument set out in this introduction rests on a twofold premise: 1) the production of ethnographic knowledge must be situated in the shared time and

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copresence of fieldwork, and 2) to the extent that the production of ethnographic knowledge is political (and this proposition must be properly demonstrated) the ethics and politics of ethnographic knowledge take place primarily in the field and not in particular products or political postures. It is from this vantage point that we seek to critically examine how anthropology knows and, by extension, what is political about anthropological knowledge. Only then can we claim to transform the conditions of anthropological knowledge itself (Strohm 2012).

If any attempt to know is "also a temporal, historical, a political act" (ibid: 1), we concur with Fabian that the analysis of intersubjectivity in ethnographic fieldwork may be a starting point for a critique of anthropology or social scientific research more generally (21). This assertion raises two important and interrelated questions. First, given the fundamentally contingent nature of ethnographic fieldwork, what are the mechanisms that make it possible for anthropologists to produce knowledge from ethnographic encounters in such disparate contexts or worlds? Second, what, if anything, is specific about the knowledge produced through ethnographic encounters? We propose to explore these questions by examining not only the production of ethnographic knowledge but the politics of how this knowledge is produced.

Our primary objective is to follow through on Fabian's suggestion that an analysis of how ethnographic knowledge is produced may provide a more critical understanding of anthropological claims and practice. We argue that the coproduced nature of ethnographic knowledge is a phenomenon whose scope and implications have not been fully appreciated, partially because of an overemphasis on representations and on objects of inquiry (White 2012). Thus we contend that anthropology must continue to attend to the question of how anthropology knows, not only how it comes to know what it claims to be true but also how it can be sure of what it advances as truth.

Historical and theoretical context

From E. E. Evans-Pritchard's observation that anthropology "interprets rather than explains" (1963) to later discussions about the arbitrary nature of anthropological terminology (for example Leach's critique of "social structure" or Needham on the notion of "belief"), the question of how objective ethnographic knowledge is produced has long dogged our discipline (Fabian 2001; Maquet 1964; Sperber 1985). As the contributions to this thematic section demonstrate, however, the nagging concern with objectivity has made it difficult for anthropologists to think about the role that intersubjectivity plays in the production of ethnographic knowledge. Peter Pels, in his contribution to this issue, compels us to examine "how intersubjectivity was (or was not) interwoven with standards of objectivity well before Malinowski." Johannes Fabian (this issue) underlines how intersubjectivity, as an epistemological concept, was at the center of attempts throughout the 1960s and 1970s to move anthropology away from a positivist paradigm of social scientific research. It is interesting to note that the strongest epistemological critiques from this period (see for example Hymes 1972 and Asad 1973) are either ignored or dismissed as having limited impact in many recent attempts to write about the history of critical approaches in anthropology (for one example see Rabinow et al. 2008).

Debates surrounding the publication of *Writing culture* (Clifford and Marcus [1986] 2011) were important, not only in terms of calling attention to ethnography as a specific genre of scientific writing but also because they opened up a much larger ideological field within which anthropologists could use their discipline to think about the relationship between culture and politics (Zenker and Kumoll 2010). The so-called "crisis of representation" literature had the unintended consequence of locating anthropological knowledge primarily in the process of ethnographic writing, in effect relegating ethnographic fieldwork to the realm of methodology (White 2012; see also Said 1989). Although certainly interested in the problem of spatiotemporal distancing, postmodernist thought in american anthropology undermined an already fragile engagement with the notion of intersubjectivity by focusing our attention more on representations and texts than on the dynamics of ethnographic encounters. Twenty-five years after this "crisis," there is a growing sentiment among anthropologists that a critique based on the notion of representations is unable to answer persistent questions about the epistemological status of anthropological knowledge, a sentiment that has even been registered by scholars generally associated with the crisis of representation literature (see for example Clifford 2012).

If representation has failed, then the notion of subjectivity has been more successful at fuelling anthropological imagination and research (see Davies and Spencer 2010; Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007). Arguably, North American anthropology was never quite the same after the *Writing culture* debates, in part because it created an analytical space for anthropologists to engage with the question of subjective experience (especially with regard to the notion of reflexivity). The notion of subjectivity, however, is unable to explain exactly how subjective experience is related to the production or the transmission of knowledge. By focusing on the notion of intersubjectivity we are able to generate questions that go well beyond Geertz's understanding of a hermeneutic anthropology. More specifically, how can anthropology come to terms with the need to understand not just experience (Duranti 2010) or even fragmented multiple subjectivities (for an overview see Ortner 2005) but also the social dynamics of situations when subjectivities are brought to bear on the human process of understanding (Crapanzano 1990; Fabian 1995; Gadamer [1966] 1989; Hollan 2008; Maranhao 1990; Ulin 2001; Watson-Franke and Watson 1975)?

Recent developments

In recent years, anthropological discourse (especially in the United States) has been increasingly concerned with anthropology's ethics and politics, bringing topics as varied as human rights, migration, refugees, violence, and neoliberalism to the forefront of the disciplinary conversation. This recent interest in a more "engaged anthropology" (Sanford and Angel-Ajani 2006; MacClancy 2002) certainly has roots in the discipline's humanist past, but it can also be seen as a kind of action-oriented response to the text-based solutions proposed by the critical anthropology of the 1980s. The emphasis in this literature has been on how the knowledge produced by anthropologists should speak to the political situation or concerns of

vulnerable populations or marginal communities. Some of its proponents argue that it is necessary to set aside intellectual critique in the name of activist research (Scheper-Hughes 1995; Hale 2006). This emerging paradigm, however, unwittingly reinforces the opposition between action and knowledge, implicitly favoring the former over the latter. The question for our purposes is whether this particular notion of politics unintentionally reproduces the very epistemic norms that must be challenged, specifically the idea that anthropological knowledge can somehow be divorced from the political dynamics of the ethnographic encounter.

As American anthropology tries (once again) to redefine itself as politically engaged and socially relevant, it is important for anthropological scholarship outside of the American yoke to show that the politics of the work we do cannot be understood without a critical examination of the moments in which ethnographers and their subjects share time; that is, the intersubjective basis of ethnographic fieldwork. Given these circumstances and challenges, what are the epistemic resources that make ethnographic fieldwork an intersubjective space in which knowledge is produced and politics are reproduced? To be sure, if knowledge is produced within and outside of anthropological discourse, creating a sort of double positionality (Mignolo 2009), this doubleness cannot be seen simply as a function of the distinction between—emic and—etic registers, or reduced to observations about the way in which anthropologists manage distance à la Geertz. As Peter Pels (1999) has argued, ethnographic research is complex because anthropological discourse must constantly tack back and forth between audiences in the communities where anthropologists work and audiences associated with academic research and publishing (Lassiter 2005; Brettell 1993). This is only one example of the epistemic resources that emerge in the coproduction of ethnographic knowledge (see Rappaport 2007).

The recent literature on "engaged" or "public" anthropology often gives the impression that in order for anthropology to be ethical its object of inquiry and its practitioners must be on the right side of politics (Bunzl 2008). If we are to avoid the potential moralism and political correctness of these postures, it seems necessary to rethink not only the subject matter of anthropological research but also the processes through which this knowledge is produced (Strohm 2012; White 2012). The relatively recent scholarly literature on collaborative ethnography has pushed forward our thinking on these issues (see Lassiter 2005, Strohm 2012, White 2012). Collaborative ethnography, which entails a deliberate attempt to share the authority of ethnographic research and resources, would be unthinkable without the various mechanisms of intersubjectivity that underlie human communication. For the record, it is important to note that there are examples of collaborative anthropology well before this practice had a name, such as the important early work of Paul Radin or the Manchester School's Monica Wilson. Intersubjectivity, however, cannot be reduced to collaboration, even when it is used in the largest sense of the term, and the literature on collaborative ethnography is more interested in the question of ethics than it is in epistemology. Probably the best illustration of this distinction is Fabian's (1996) groundbreaking ethnography about popular painting and memory in the Congo. *Remembering the present* (1996), a book that is every bit as important as Fabian's oft-cited *Time and the other* (1983), should not be read as a collaborative ethnography, but it is one of the few examples we have of

how intersubjectivity actually functions in the context of field-based ethnographic research.

The common sense observation that ethnographic knowledge is coproduced must be seen not only as a point of departure but also as an object of inquiry and, especially now, as an object of critique. "Now" because the lessons learned from the critiques of the 1980s must not be limited to the topics that we investigate or the nature of our political engagement as citizens, rather they should be applied to the very foundation of the work that we do as anthropologists: fieldwork. In this thematic section, we want to consider how epistemological critique might question assumptions about conventional ethnographic wisdom since it renders epistemic norms such as objectivity and subjectivity explicit, turning our attention instead to the dynamics of intersubjectivity and making it possible for us to see how ethnographic encounters manufacture cultural knowledge and, in turn, produce theory. As Fabian suggests in his contribution to this section, there are still many loose ends to which we must attend.

Concepts and debates

This special section was inspired by a workshop organized in Montreal in 2008 on the production of knowledge in ethnographic fieldwork.[1] During this workshop, a heated debate emerged about two distinct ways of using and understanding the term "intersubjectivity." The first definition, which is not interested in the goal or the quality of exchange within or across cultures, refers to the basic conditions that make human communication possible. The second definition, conversely, takes intersubjectivity as a goal or an ideal, something to be achieved, and is often evoked in response to the criticisms lodged against anthropology as a colonial or neocolonial enterprise. While the first definition is concerned with what makes communication possible and is thus epistemological in substance, the second definition is more interested in what makes communication ethical. Needless to say this distinction has led to some degree of polarization, with some scholars expressing discomfort with the ethicization of intersubjectivity and others its ontologization (see Fabian, this issue; Duranti 2010). We argue that neither of these two definitions can be ignored, nor can they be collapsed or conflated. Indeed, "after objectivity" (Pels, this issue) and after the crisis of representation (White 2012), the politics of ethnographic knowledge comes from the interplay between the two. Each of the texts in this thematic section tries to come to terms with these definitions using a different conceptual framework, and not always explicitly.

The articles in this section are more concerned with the processes of ethnographic research than with the texts that it produces, and together they express a healthy skepticism with regard to the representational paradigm that has become

1. This workshop, entitled "How does anthropology know? Ethnographic fieldwork and the co-production of knowledge," took place September 25–27, 2008 and was made possible with support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. For more information about the workshop and ongoing research pertaining to this project, see www.atalaku.net/intersubjectivity.

prominent in anthropological circles not only in the United States but also in Canada and the United Kingdom. We begin from the observation that anthropological theory in recent decades has been mostly concerned with the problems of objectivity and subjectivity—a theme that obviously predates the postmodernism debate of the 1980s—while the core of anthropological practice is and continues to be grounded in the intersubjective dynamics of the ethnographic encounter. This aspect of our work, arguably the most important contribution of our discipline to the human sciences, has not only been undertheorized, but undervalued and misunderstood (White 2012).

Bringing together scholars working on the coproduction of ethnographic knowledge in various historical and political contexts, this collection of articles aims to use anthropology as a base from which to examine how qualitative researchers produce and mobilize different types of knowledge in the name of culture and politics. In a reflective essay, Johannes Fabian reconsiders some of the avenues that have since been taken around the related issues of intersubjectivity, coevalness, and communication that he promoted in his early writings. In particular he is concerned broadly with the relationship between epistemology and ethics, and more specifically the problems that arise when epistemological insights are transformed into methodological prescriptions. For Eric Gable it is the emotions that emerge within ethnographic *rapport* that allows us to reassess the politics of the ethnographic encounter. Taking guilt as a productive emotion, Gable asks how this moral mutuality impacted upon his understanding of social life. With a broad historical view of the discipline, Peter Pels takes aim at the notion of intersubjectivity within contemporary anthropology, especially as it has become increasingly dressed up in such notions as advocacy, dialogue, collaboration, and other related moralities. His contribution is to place these recent methodological trends in historical perspective through a reconsideration of the functions of intersubjectivity within the epistemological challenges facing anthropology as a science. While the contributors to this section do not necessarily use the term in the same way, they all seem to be interested in challenging anthropologists to see intersubjectivity as a central aspect of anthropology's politics, and dare we say, its future.

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